Visiting a Correctional Facility Tip Sheets

1. Planning for a Child to Visit Their Parent

There are many details to consider when planning a visit. These include prison regulations, unanticipated expenses, the busy demands of daily life, school, and work, and the intense emotions that connecting with a parent in prison can bring up. All of these may present barriers to visiting but the benefits of staying connected throughout a period of incarceration are well documented.

Deciding whether or not to visit

Is the child's contact with their parent in prison allowed, both by the court and the correctional facility? If so, is contact desirable? Do the child, the parent in prison, and the child's caregiver all want contact?

WHO WILL BRING THE CHILD TO VISIT?

If contact is allowed and desired but the caregiver is not able to (or prefers not to) take a child to visit, **consider other adults in the child's life who could support the visit**. Many families ask a relative, friend, case manager, or social worker.

WHAT WILL THE PRISON VISIT BE LIKE?

Before bringing a child to see their parent in prison, try to **visit the prison on your own at least once** so you can explain what their visiting experience will be like. It may help to show them a photo of the outside of the facility. This helps them visualize what the prison looks like and, upon arriving for their visit, they may feel less intimidated by the fencing and razor wire.

To confirm where a child's parent is located, you can use an inmate locator online. There is a federal inmate locator and there are also inmate locators for each state.

Emotional considerations

HOW WILL A VISIT IMPACT THE CHILD'S FEELINGS, AND MY OWN?

For most children, connecting with a parent in prison can bring up a lot of complicated feelings. Talking with the child ahead of time, naming some possible emotions, and setting realistic expectations can help.

If you will be accompanying the child to see their parent and you have your own relationship to that parent, visiting may bring up difficult feelings for you as well as for the child. Dealing with your own emotions will be hard both during and following the visit. It may help to **remember that you are doing something incredibly important for the child.** Hang in there. Talk with a trusted friend or family member for support.

Practical considerations

CAN I AFFORD TO BRING THE CHILD TO VISIT?

In-person visiting can create a financial strain for some families, especially if the prison is located far from the child's home or if caregivers need to take time off work. There are usually fixed visiting schedules and there is little or no flexibility to visit at other times. **Consider what you can manage financially before committing to in-person visiting.** If the related expenses create a burden, consider looking into community programs or services that might provide financial assistance.

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There are other ways for a child and their parent to stay connected when budget constraints prevent visiting in person. See *Staying Connected* pages 8-11.

HOW WILL WE GET THERE?

Often, families do not have access to reliable transportation. If transportation presents a barrier to visiting, **consider looking into local programs that could provide rides or financial assistance** for gas or travel-related expenses.

Necessary paperwork

WHAT DO WE NEED TO BRING WITH US?

Certain documents are required for visiting and it may take a little time to make sure they are in order. **Here are some things you will need to keep in mind:**

- **Visitors under age 18 must be accompanied by an adult.**
- Adult visitors must bring a **government issued photo ID** (e.g., a driver's license) and a **copy of the child's birth certificate.**
- Before planning a visit **make sure that you and the child are on the parent's approved visitors list.** Ask the parent in prison to confirm or call the facility to speak to the parent's case manager.
- If someone other than the child's legal guardian brings them to visit, that individual must be on the approved visitors list and **they must provide a written statement from the child's legal guardian giving them permission.**
- **Children and adults who are victims of the parent's crime may not be allowed to visit.** Ask the facility for more information.

Knowing the rules

WHAT RULES ARE VISITORS REQUIRED TO FOLLOW WHILE VISITING?

Every correctional facility has its own rules. Visiting an out-of-state prison may be different from an in-state-prison and visiting a men's facility may be different than a women's facility. It is important to know the particular rules at the correctional facility you will visit. Contact the facility directly for specific information about their regulations and visiting environment. For example, you may want to ask:

- What is the visiting schedule, how long will the visit be, and how many visitors are allowed?
- Can we bring anything with us into the visit? Where do we leave our belongings?
- Is the visit face to face or through a video monitor or phone? Is physical contact allowed?
- Is there a dress code we need to follow?
- Are food and drinks available during the visit? Is a restroom available?
- Are there any toys, coloring supplies, or activities to keep a child busy during the visit?
- If a visitor has an infant or needs an assistive device or medication, are there accommodations?
- What circumstances might cut a visit short, or prevent us from visiting at all?

Other Useful Resources from Resilience Beyond Incarceration:

All of these and more can be found on our website: lrcvt.org/resilience-beyond-incarceration

- **Visiting Dad in Prison:** 6-minute video
- **Visiting Dad in Prison:** Viewers' Guide
- **Visiting a Correctional Facility Tip Sheets #2 and #3**
- **Families Strong:** A Handbook for Supporters of Children and Families Affected by Parental Incarceration
- **Staying Connected:** Strengthening Relationships between Children and Their Parents in Prison
- **Even When We Are Apart,** a comforting book that creates an opportunity for sensitive conversations

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2. Helping to Prepare a Child to Visit Their Parent

For most children, staying connected to their parent throughout a period of incarceration has many benefits. Encouraging and supporting contact is important, and preparation is key.

What does a child hope will happen when they visit?

EXPECTATIONS CAN BE TRICKY

Many children hold unrealistic and unspoken expectations around visiting their parent. If this is a concern for you, you can try to gently shift those expectations to align more closely with what the child is likely to experience. If you do this prior to the visit they will be less likely to be disappointed with what happens during the visit.

Using age-appropriate explanations, **talk with a child about some of the unexpected things that might happen while visiting in prison.** Then, if an unanticipated event does occur, the child will be better prepared to deal with it. Unexpected events that might affect a visit include things like a prison lockdown or a parent being sent to solitary. There could also be a disruption in the visiting room between visitors or inmates that requires correctional officers to intervene. Knowing ahead of time what might happen can help to dismantle some of the anxiety that many children feel when visiting their parent, especially for the first time.

What is it like to visit in a prison?

PRISON IS LIKE NO OTHER PLACE THE CHILD HAS BEEN BEFORE

A correctional facility will feel very different than any of the other places that children spend their time. Therefore, it is important to prepare a child for what they might experience when visiting with their parent. For example, mom or dad may look a little different; they might have a different haircut and everyone will be wearing the same clothes. The visiting room may look stark and there will likely be many unfamiliar people also visiting their loved ones. The environment is restrictive and there are rules that must be followed. **Explain the rules for prison visits ahead of time** to help prepare a child for what to expect. See *Visiting a Correctional Facility Tip Sheet #1.*

THE PRESENCE OF CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS MIGHT BE FRIGHTENING

Introduce the child to the idea that correctional officers will be present at the visit. They are dressed in uniforms and **they try to assure all of the visitors and the men or women incarcerated stay safe.** Correctional officers may not appear friendly, so it is important to remind children ahead of time that the officers are just doing their job and it's important not to take their lack of warmth or kindness personally. Be sure to **remind the child that a correctional officer's job is to enforce prison rules** and if any visitor does not follow the rules, they will have to leave.

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How can I support a child before, visiting their parent?

CONVERSATIONS STARTERS CAN HELP

Some children have many things they want to tell their parent while other children may struggle to come up with ideas. To help prepare for a visit, encourage the child to think about some of the things they might want to tell their parent. It can be as simple as what they ate for dinner last night to sharing news of bigger life events like a birthday, a graduation, or losing a first tooth. You can find sample conversation starters in *Staying Connected* on pages 36-37. **Try to support the child in creating a list that will spark some conversation.** You can keep a running list of ideas on the refrigerator and then review it together right before they go in to see their mom or dad.

ROUTINES CAN HELP

Keep in mind that the days and hours leading up to a visit can be difficult for children. Often, intense feelings can accompany the anticipation of seeing their parent. Heightened emotions may be hard to manage and might be expressed through disruptive behavior. It will be helpful to **establish some familiar and comforting routines** for these difficult times. To help calm nerves, consider having a soothing item to snuggle or an engaging activity for the child to participate in while traveling to the facility. It might be important to eat a snack, get a drink, and use the restroom before arriving at the prison since these things may not be available while visiting.

BOOKS CAN HELP

Consider using books about incarceration as a powerful tool to provide support for a child. Books may help answer unspoken questions. **They can also validate the child's emotions and help them know they are not alone in their experience.** Reading a book together also provides an opening for you to have a deeper converstaion. There are many books that address incarceration. See our website for a list.

How can I empower a child to make their own decisions about visiting?

A CHILD'S FEELINGS WILL BE COMPLICATED AND MAY CHANGE OVER TIME

Help a child to explore their thoughts and feelings about visiting and listen carefully. While visiting may be encouraged, forcing a child to visit their parent is not helpful. **If a child tells you they do not want to visit their parent in prison, respect that wish and allow them to change their mind if and when they feel differently.** There are many other ways to stay connected when visits are not possible or not wanted. For ideas, refer to *Staying Connected*.

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3. Supporting a Child During and After a Visit With Their Parent

It is impossible to anticipate what a child's visiting experience will be, what emotions may arise, or how the interaction with their parent will go. Children generally have a better experience if they feel well equipped to deal with the unexpected and they know that you are there to support them when they have to leave their parent at the end of the visit.

During a visit

Try to ensure that the child's needs are being met. This might be difficult, especially considering your own emotional expereiences and the hopes and needs of the child's parent. Here are some suggestions:

- Help to guide the conversation so the child and parent have something to talk about.
- Offer emotional support to the child as needed throughout the visit.
- Help the child remember the things they wanted to tell their parent.
- Tune in to how the parent might express their own needs and how that may affect the child.
- Provide time checks as the visit progresses so they are aware when there is half an hour remaining, ten minutes remaining, and so on. It can be very hard for a child to leave their parent so giving them ample warning is important.

It can be helpful to **have a few activities that can keep a child and parent engaged** in case conversation feels hard. See *Staying Connected* pages 38-54 for games, riddles, stories, and other fun things to do together. The directions are for sharing activities through letters, email, video visits, or phone conversations, but they can be easily adapted for in-person visiting. Consider the following:

- Claim your strengths (pg. 39)
- Play the alphabet game (pg. 40)
- Guess riddles (pg. 44)
- Share a song or rhyme (pg. 46)
- Tell a joke (pg. 47)
- Play "Would you rather?" (pg. 50)
- Play 20 questions (pg. 50)

After a visit

A variety of intense emotions are completely normal and to be expected. Two children who leave the same visit may respond very differently. In the same manner, a child may leave a visit one week feeling calm and relaxed and the following week leave a visit feeling agitated or completely devastated. **It is important to validate the child's experience and help them through whatever they are feeling.**

Some children are not able to identify or talk about their feelings; others don't want to. Either way, **intense emotions can drive behavior changes or disruptions which must be met with a thoughtful and compassionate response.**

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Consider the following ideas to help support a child following a visit:

- **Have a comfort plan for the child** immediately following a visit, for example providing a stuffed animal, favorite book, or photograph.
- **Plan a special activity** the child looks forward to immediately following a visit. This might be stopping on the way home for a treat, going to a park they like, or cooking a favorite meal together.
- **Ask other caring adults like a relative, teacher, or counselor to support the child after a visit.** Make sure they know when visits will happen and what supports might be needed (e.g., maybe a phone call to check in on how they're doing).
- **Share a book together.** There are some good children's books about visiting a parent in prison. Refer to our website to find a list. Books may ease a child's sense of isolation and create an opportunity for meaningful conversations.
- **Remind the child that lots of kids have a parent incarcerated.** The child might have met a new friend among the other visitors at the prison or they may feel a connection with a character in the book you share.

Just as children experience intense feelings after visiting, caregivers can also feel emotionally overwhelmed. Depending on your relationship with the parent who is incarcerated, you may feel relief, loss, worry, sadness, anger, grief, and frustration. You may also feel exhausted, both physically and mentally, from the intense effort of supporting a child at a visit and afterwards. It may be particularly hard for you if the child's visit strengthens their sense of loyalty or sparks renewed admiration for their parent while disregarding their relationship with you.

Keep in mind that what you are doing is really important for the child AND **it is important to have your own support system ready if and when you need it.** Most likely, there are people in your community who are available to help. You may find these people in unexpected places.

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